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Debating Difference: Haitian transnationalism in Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic*

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Abstract

Blacks who have descended from the nineteenth century Atlantic slave trade have historically debated and worked to claim a sense of cultural identity that reflects their African heritage and their identity as diasporic. *Callaloo* as an academic journal specifically emphasizes the investigation of both black diaspora and their cultural expression. I am particularly interested in how people of the black Atlantic claim their multiple identities since, for people of a diaspora, one main factor is the fact that they inhabit multiple spaces but cannot call any home. How does transnationalism become a better way to describe the cultural identity of those in the “black Atlantic” since these people have to create new or adapted identities as they move from place to place?

For Paul Gilroy, the “black Atlantic” applies to people who descended from slaves forced to come to New World (19). In a sense, slavery is a major part of African diasporic history, but I would claim that as time has progressed and people of this lineage came to find homes in the Caribbean, America, and Europe and they have not lost their heritage. Instead, they have retained these identities in a transnational sense. Multiple cultural identities become integrated into each transnational individual, making each person unique to his or her culture without losing sight of his or her common heritage.

I explore these identity formations through a close reading of *The Butterfly's Way: Voices from the Haitian Diaspora (sic) in the United States* (2001), a collection of short stories, poetry, and personal accounts from Haitian diaspora in the United States, whose stories delve into the issue of transnational identity. The idea of diaspora as read in the text of *The Butterfly's Way* emphasizes that the more fluid and encompassing terms of hybridity and transnationalism more accurately describe the geographical movements and consequential amassing of black identification within Paul Gilroy's concept of the “black Atlantic.”

My analysis is supported by a survey of theoretical discourses, particularly those related to black identity. I utilize post-colonial theory while focusing particularly on transnationalism and diasporic studies through Stuart Hall, as well as W.E.B. Du Bois's conception of “double consciousness” to support and develop my argument on how blacks negotiate multiple identities (11). To discuss the formation of a people, I use the work of political theorist Ernesto Laclau, in particular, his arguments in *On Populist Reason* (2007) on group identity and demand. Gilroy's concept of the “black Atlantic” has many similarities to Laclau's notion of the “empty signifier” as a way for people to form groups for collective action.

I conclude that transnationalism works as better way to describe the black diaspora since black descendants of slaves have retained multiple identities as Africans as well as citizens of their current nations. My paper argues that transnationalism and hybridity function as better terms to describe people who have the Atlantic slave trade in their history.

Debating Difference: Investigating Haitian transnationalism in Paul Gilroy's "black Atlantic"

The history of the Atlantic slave trade with its massive transferal of blacks from Africa to the West and consequent erasure of cultural and genealogical identity has made the question of black identity a prevalent one, especially where many blacks are only known by the color of their skin and not the heritage they carry. These discussions emerge especially in post-colonial studies where practitioners trace the history of colonialism and work to find instances of resistance by the colonized and also identify where the colonizers exert their Imperial, ideological power. They also seek to emphasize the repositioning of the colonial subject as a free agent in a post-colonial world. Much of this repositioning becomes the recovery and reestablishment of lost culture over that of the dominant, colonial hegemony. In particular, black diaspora created through the Atlantic slave trade has attempted to reclaim their shared African identity across national borders. Since the abolition of slavery, black academics and writers particularly in the Western hemisphere have worked to reclaim their cultural identity. Paul Gilroy's text *The Black Atlantic* fits into this narrative of diasporic, African identity since he tries to create a label for all blacks descended from the slave trade to gather under and claim a mutual identity.

In Haiti, where blacks set a precedent by successfully resisting their slave masters, the narrative of identity takes a unique turn. Many Haitian transnationals remain true to their Haitian identity as political resisters and take this identity with them to other countries. In describing the global nature of Haitian political resistance through literature, Valerie Kaussen concludes that:

Twentieth century Haitian literature thus forms an integral part of the constellation of anti-colonial discourses that developed globally in the twentieth century. Indeed, the universalist ideals of liberty and human rights that grounded Haiti's eighteenth-century slave revolt and war of decolonization (which ended in 1804) persist into the twentieth century to inform an increasingly global movement of resistance to the continuing inequities of global capitalism (xiii).

Here, Kaussen makes the case that Haitian citizens carry their culture with them and use their history to assert political agency in a decolonizing world. In this sense, Haitian citizens also assert effective praxis within post-colonialism as a discipline. Edwidge Danticat, a prolific Haitian writer, editor, and political activist living in the United States, focuses on the literature of Haitian transnationals and the diaspora (Danticat 241; Mirabel 27). In particular, Danticat's anthology *The Butterfly's Way: Voices from the Haitian Diaspora (sic) in the United States* collects personal stories from Haitian immigrants whose lives express their Haitian transnational identity. Kaussen specifically defines Danticat in this way: "Danticat writes in English and her emphasis on testimony over history situates her within the literary context both of Francophone and Anglophone postcolonial literature as well as U.S. immigrant literatures" and later "her focus on the theme of diaspora replays her own position between the Haitian literary tradition and the burgeoning tradition of the American immigrant and postcolonial literatures" (187). In this way, Danticat emphasizes the transnational experience in her own writing. I use transnationalism to mean that while these Haitians hold onto their heritage as "black Atlantic," they also maintain their Haitian heritage and other cultural identities as integral parts of their individual selves. Thus this paper analyzes how people define cultural identity, particularly transnationalism through the concept of diaspora for people of African descent whose history in the West, particularly in Haiti, began with the Atlantic slave trade.

Today, many describe blacks as part of the African diaspora. In this way, descendants of the Atlantic slave trade who live in multiple countries are tied to the homeland of Africa to which they cannot ever truly return. Thus, blacks of this context experience a loss. Although these descendants of the colonized peoples have retained that history of slavery, they have gone on to recreate themselves as citizens or even doubly conscious citizens of their places of

residence. These doublings constitute the people of the “black Atlantic” as transnational hybrid citizens (Gilroy 19). Not only do these persons find themselves as citizens of a diasporic community of Africans but they also take on the histories of the countries that they inhabit, giving themselves more contexts in which to claim identity. Transnationalism becomes a better way to describe these people since, while the history of slavery need never be forgotten, blacks who have descended from the African slave trade have created more cultural contexts that builds on this identity, allowing them to move forward as a more hybrid, adapting people. Hybridity works then to show that these blacks have adapted and progressed from the past history of slavery and created a diverse, ever-changing, and ever-growing cultural identity. Thus, blacks of the diaspora can be seen as hybrid transnational people whose individual contexts serve to both unite and individualize them within the “black Atlantic.”

This paper seeks to add to the current debate surrounding the construction of a black identity after colonialism and slavery. As post-colonial theory establishes itself as a discipline that focuses in part on recovering a cultural memory for previously colonized nations, the notion of how the people of these nations define identity become important. My paper comes as a response to discussions regarding the creation a black diasporic community. It responds specifically to Gilroy’s contribution by presenting a unique way in which a particular group of people define themselves within the black diaspora. The Haitian writers I analyze present unique arguments to the notion of diaspora, transnationalism, and identity formation within the diaspora and within themselves. These writers emphasize a cultural specificity to Gilroy’s “black Atlantic,” and are thus useful in nuancing Gilroy’s claims. Defining and maintaining a cultural group identity becomes useful for political praxis, and the stories in *The Butterfly’s Way* reflect the complexity within such a group identity.

For my project, I utilize post-colonial theory, and thus take specific terms from the discipline, namely: diaspora, transnationalism and hybridity, to guide my analysis. Post-colonial theory stems from the movement of previously colonized countries to reclaim identity and regain power as people rather than oppressed persons. My investigation of cultural identity, particularly those of blacks of the Haitian diaspora, fits neatly into this field of inquiry because of the Haitian past of slavery and independence. Also, because I address Paul Gilroy through my paper, post-colonial theory becomes that much more important as he uses theorists like Du Bois, Martin Delany, and others who have also been influenced by a colonial past and write in response to this colonization. Du Bois, whose work fits into both critical race theory and sociology, also remains integral to my theoretical framework. His work on double-consciousness presents a way to understand blacks in America and how they negotiate their identities as both black and American. I use Stuart Hall's research on cultural identity, particularly diaspora and hybridity. His context as a Jamaican-British intellectual puts him directly into the context of my paper on "black Atlantic" transnationalism, and he discusses his own context as an influence on his work. I am also branching into political theory through Ernesto Laclau because he describes steps towards the formation of a people. Particularly in post-colonial theory, cultural identity has become highly politicized, and Gilroy, in creating this community has made a way for a strong, largely populated political force. In his text he even asserts that the Atlantic became a medium for former slaves and other blacks to communicate political messages to each other on separate continents. Taking from Gilroy's work, I assert that the black Atlantic does indeed become political force formed in the same way that Laclau describes the formation of a people. Seeing how this similarity can be problematized necessitates the inclusion of Laclau's work. For my paper, post-colonial theory takes the majority of my analysis, but as the discipline of cultural

studies is indeed a field that emphasizes praxis, Laclau remains integral to my inquiry into black identity for the “black Atlantic.”

1. Literature Review

Paul Gilroy uses what he calls the “black Atlantic” to describe a diasporic community of all blacks who have come from the genealogical history of the Atlantic slave trade (19). In this way, he takes from the discussion of black identity to describe a specifically transatlantic, grounded cultural group. This paper uses Gilroy’s concept of the “black Atlantic” to talk about the more recent conceptualization of group identity for black descendants of the Atlantic slave trade. Gilroy’s conception provides the framework for the discussion on diasporic identity. However, since I advocate a more transnational approach to what I see as more current trends in black identity of this context, my paper also takes from Ernesto Laclau’s conception of the “empty signifier,” Hall’s reconfiguration of the term “diaspora,” and Du Bois’ “double-consciousness” in order to formulate a more nuanced position on group identity, particularly Haitian diasporic identity as hybrid and transnational (Laclau 96; Hall 235; Du Bois 11). My survey of texts will specifically focus on keywords within each of these texts. It begins with a discussion of Gilroy’s “black Atlantic,” compare it to Laclau’s “empty signifier,” turn to Hall’s “diaspora” and then hybridity, and end with Du Bois’ “double-consciousness.” Lastly, I will raise the importance of Danticat’s text in my analysis.

Reading Hall and Du Bois’ conception of blackness, identity functions as a continuous navigation of selves. The transnational self acknowledges these multiplicities and accepts them. Instead of a debate of authenticity and generalizability, the “black Atlantic” as an “empty signifier” needs to remain as such. Rather than functioning as a blanket term that seeks to blur difference and simply define the marginal difference as hybrid, the “black Atlantic” should

investigate this difference and celebrate it. These differences should not serve to divide the “black Atlantic” but should instead further define the “black Atlantic” for what it is: a diverse group of people whose shared history contains slavery, but which has continued to grow into strong nations, distinct cultures, and unique expressions of both unity and difference. My paper asserts that the Haitian diaspora provides an example of how Gilroy’s text does not make room for transnationalism and other cultural contexts at work today within the “black Atlantic” identity.

1.1 The Black Atlantic

Gilroy begins his argument in the middle of the debate over defining black cultural identity. Specifically, Gilroy goes against ethnicity and nationalism in favor of diaspora. For Gilroy, ethnicity is too essentialist, and the nation-state is too outmoded in light of the current trends of globalization. He uses texts from pan-Africanists, nineteenth and twentieth century black intellectuals, and contemporary black music to assert a common diasporic identity. To create this communal identity for people of the “black Atlantic,” Gilroy formulates the image of the slave ship as a common identifier, or “empty signifier” that unites all black persons who share a common history of the Atlantic slave trade (Laclau 96). For Gilroy, the Atlantic and the ships that crossed its waters not only represents that Dark Passage that transported Africans to the West but also the medium by which ships carried ideas of freedom, black intellectuals, and cultural expressions. In this way, the ship becomes for Gilroy a metaphor of unity created by slavery, transportation, and shared loss of the homeland.

1.2 The Empty Signifier

Gilroy’s metaphor likens to that of political theorist Ernesto Laclau who focuses mainly on the concept of populism for political practice. What Laclau terms the political has to do with

the formation of a people in order to articulate demands to the ruling government. His concern is not the governance itself; rather, his text explains how silenced citizens can gain voice and form a collective group against an oppressor when demands have been unmet. From Laclau comes the term, “empty signifier,” or collective identity or mantra that unites a people with differential demands. This “empty signifier” becomes a symbol that unites people under one banner. For Gilroy, this “empty signifier” is the “black Atlantic” in that it functions as a metaphor of shared oppression through slavery to unite blacks of the West. Using the context of slavery, Gilroy wishes to conceive of blacks of different nations and cultures who nonetheless share this slave history as part of the same transatlantic group. Gilroy’s ‘black Atlantic’ then becomes a broad term of unity of blacks of this context.

I am particularly interested in Laclau’s notion of exclusion within the creation of a people. Laclau says “there is no totalization without exclusion,” and later, “equivalence and difference are ultimately incompatible with each other; none the less, they require each other as necessary conditions for the construction of the social” (78-80). Laclau asserts that as a group continues to form and unite under one common demand, demands that differ from what comes to be the “empty signifier” will gradually merge into the larger demand. He admits that difference does indeed occur within the formation of a people, but he assumes that the opposition to the oppressor will unite people with inherent differences. Black history in the United States, Europe, and the Caribbean is filled with instances when blacks banded together to achieve political goals. Gilroy uses Laclau’s “empty signifier” for political reasons as well, particularly for the uniting of blacks over history in order to show a consistent trajectory of black activism, cultural unity, and political power. By focusing on a desire for cultural unity, Gilroy mirrors Laclau’s concept of the “empty signifier” since, for him, the demand is for black power as a collective people.

In interpreting Gilroy's text, I can see how exclusion certainly occurs within his construction of the "black Atlantic" as an "empty signifier." Gilroy makes effective arguments on how blacks are certainly connected to each other by a shared history of Atlantic slavery; however, he too quickly does away with nationalism and ethnicity. While blacks find common roots in Africa, they have come to reside in new places, where they create a new sense of community and form more complex histories. For example, being black in Haiti is different from being black in the United States or Europe. The histories are different and the racial stratification is different. The concept of nationhood may be different. For example, the United States continues to emphasize ethnicity by hyphenating its citizens. One is not simply American; one is African-American. I assert that cultural context and nationality still matters to the formation of a cultural group united by race and the past history of slavery.

1.3 Diaspora

According to Gilroy, the "black Atlantic" diasporic community becomes associated with the Jewish experience of constant exile and desire for a homeland. Gilroy cites Martin Delany, an African American political thinker, as appropriating the term in order to describe the African American desire to return to Africa (23). Later in his text, Gilroy returns to the concept of diaspora to make connections between blacks in North America and in Europe and thus parallel the Jewish struggle with that of the black (211). This becomes a discussion of pan-Africanism and its history throughout black thought.

Pan-Africanism stems from a desire to return the African homeland. Gilroy examines the history of this movement in his text as one that rose in the nineteenth century and continued throughout "black Atlantic" thought. However, Stuart Hall constructs a different form of diaspora that actually refutes the desire for a lost homeland inherent in pan-Africanism. Rather,

he constructs diaspora as similar to Derrida's term *différance* (Derrida 7). In his study of Caribbean "Third Cinema" where he asserts that "All these cultural practices and forms of representation have the black subjects at their centre, putting the issue of cultural identity into question," Hall ultimately concludes that "Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a *positioning*" (226). I concur with Hall's definition of cultural identity. Rather than seeing identity as a fixed essence, Hall describes it as a position, thus bringing in historicity and contextualization. Gilroy asserts that his work moves away from essentialism and static terms of ethnicity and nationalism, but by creating a community based on nineteenth century texts that generalize blacks into a previously enslaved people, he reasserts that same essentialism. Hall says this is especially true for people in the Caribbean whose history of slavery disrupted any form of traditional history they had earlier claimed.

1.4 Hybridity

In this way, diaspora for Hall is ever-changing rather than the persistent desire for what he sees as a no longer claimable past. Rather, Hall emphasizes that in the Caribbean, one finds a distinct diasporic identity. He says: "The diaspora experience as I intend it here is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*" (Hall 235). Because of the Caribbean's unique position as a place of universal slavery, creolization, multiple displacements and assimilations of nations, its culture cannot be essentialized or seen as unchangeable. Like Gilroy, Hall rejects what he sees as stagnant essentialism, but he certainly specifies his concept of diaspora to the Caribbean art form and culture.

For my paper, Hall's definition of diaspora and hybridity becomes integral to my argument, for these definitions take into account the changeability of identity and adds cultural and historical specificity to what nationality and cultural identity can mean to a group of people. Gilroy addresses hybridity in his text only scantily. Hall's definition takes into account the changeability of identity and resists its stagnation or fixity. What becomes important to any formation of a cultural group is historical context. History positions people and contextualizes them, making their existences and assertions unique to their time. Gilroy uses his text to find the commonalities between blacks of the background of slavery, and this remains important. Unity provides strength, but I assert that this unity must not ignore the differences and contexts of the people he wishes to draw together. The hybridity that becomes inherent to people of the black Atlantic need not be ignored for the sake of generalizability.

1.5 Double-consciousness

Hall's definition of diaspora fits into what I see as the culturally multiple or transnational identity of the black Atlantic person, and W. E. B. Du Bois hits on a similar theme. Gilroy does cite Du Bois in his text. He uses Du Bois' work *The Souls of Black Folk* to emphasize the African American author's desire for Pan-Africanism. Gilroy says:

“There is a sense in which the blackness invoked there is in a complex, dissonant relationship to the word ‘folk’ which follows it, narrowing the meaning of the title and tying it tightly to a highly specific but also highly mystical and organic conception of community that is not straightforwardly endorsed by the text” (128).

However, Du Bois does indeed describe a very specific black experience based on his study. By using folk to describe blacks, Du Bois makes the type of blackness he describes into something more intimate. His title focuses blackness to a specific context, and indeed, as he introduces each chapter with music from African American spirituals. In this way, Du Bois specifies blackness and makes it a historical, contextualized identity.

Du Bois takes from his ethnographic study of blacks in the South to describe what he calls “a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others....two-ness, --an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (11). Du Bois’ notion of “double-consciousness” has influenced inquiry into the nature of black identity since the writing of his book. “Double-consciousness” becomes a way to describe living in a world in which one is trapped between the identity one carries and the identity that is placed upon oneself by society. While the emphasis on the cultural unity of blacks remains important, one cannot ignore the historic specificity to Du Bois’ claims. Du Bois’ double-consciousness individualizes the African American experience as one in which there is an ever-present split of identity. For Haitian transnationals, a similar double-ness exists. Toni Morrison resurrects that theme of African American split identity when she says: “American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with hyphen after hyphen after hyphen” (47). I assert that Du Bois asserts a culturally specific form of African American identity. Indeed, one example of the Haitian accounts I utilize in my paper addresses this same feeling of double-consciousness when living as a Haitian in the United States. Gilroy uses Du Bois in his work but argues that Du Bois’ cultural specificity to the context of the United States is less important than he and Du Bois’ need to unite blacks into what could be called a pan-African state. For Du Bois in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this idea would have been viable as the genealogy of Africans to Africa was much closer, but now diaspora works as a more relevant term since now blacks have created new histories in different nations. These differences do not serve to differentiate from their shared past but rather contextualize each person’s experiences within the diaspora.

1.6 Haiti as example

I focus on specifically how Haitian members of Gilroy's "black Atlantic" do indeed emphasize these cultural differences within themselves and how they hold onto these identities. Edwidge Danticat's *The Butterfly's Way: Voices from the Haitian Diaspora (sic) in the United States* becomes the source of my analysis. I narrowed my texts within the anthology to personal accounts in order to hear the unique voice of experience. I chose women writers since many of Gilroy's examples are male voices. Natasha Barnes notes this marked absence of sustained attention to female voices in Gilroy's "black Atlantic" (Barnes106). I wish to add to Gilroy's argument not only by offering my analysis of his work but also by bringing in different voices to challenge his claims. Thus I focus on women writers of the Haitian diaspora not only because a majority of the writers in the anthology are women but also because their voice is markedly absent in Gilroy's text.

For the Haitian diaspora, this history of slavery is different from, for example, the African American context since the Haitians successfully rebelled against their masters and formed "the first independent nation in all Latin America" (Farmer 63). For the Haitian diaspora, I find a constant navigation between identities. One woman in the text named Sandy Alexandre says of her own experience: "With each child that a Haitian mother has to raise in America, she has to deal with the *triple*-consciousness of its Haitian, American, and Black identities" (184). Alexandre shows here through her observations the complexity of identity since she sees race as being only one of several factors in constituting identity. One could argue that all of these identities fit into the "black Atlantic," but what I find in Danticat's text is that these identities are nonetheless treated as different. Danticat's text is integral to my paper because, from it, I listen to the voices of diaspora and transnationalism. The stories within the anthology describe a struggle

for cultural identity in either the United States, Haiti, or wherever the writers find themselves. For me, transnationalism, diaspora, and hybridity better define the type of identities that blacks from the Caribbean hold. It is not that these identities must be ignored or subsumed into one another. Rather, one finds a constant struggle for people of the diaspora to reconcile all of these identities.

It is through the insight of Hall's more hybrid definition of diaspora and Du Bois' awareness of double-consciousness that I find identity to be a very complex, constantly shifting object of analysis. For Du Bois, identity is not singular, but rather doubled in his case. For Hall, identity is ever-changing and always multiplied as each person's context creates a shift in identity. The notion of identity does not remain a stagnant, "empty signifier." Instead, cultural identity remains hybrid and contextual. Hall's definition of diaspora attests to this potentiality of change through what he describes as a positioning. Complicating Gilroy's "black Atlantic" through the addition of historicity and cultural contextualization emphasizes the dangers of generalizable identity. The "black Atlantic" does indeed exist; however, this diasporic community holds multiple identities, histories, and cultural manifestations that make blacks from the context of slavery more than simply their history. Rather, through the example of Haitian transnationalism, my paper shows how identity ultimately adapts to nation, history, and other contexts. No longer static and focused on one history, Identity instead becomes an ever-changing source of community survival where history remains important, and with it, people move forward.

2. Case Studies

The book from which I derive my examples for analysis is Edwidge Danticat's *The Butterfly's Way*. This anthology contains personal accounts and short works by writers of the

Haitian diaspora who live predominantly in the United States. Danticat divides the collection into the sections: childhood, migration, half/first generation, return, and future. In order to stay in accordance with Gilroy's construction of the "black Atlantic," I focused my readings to accounts within the sections of "Migration" and "Half/First Generation." The woman writers I analyze include graduate students, a grade school teacher, the co-founder of a publishing company, a journalist, and a female Rastafarian (Danticat 241-245). My analysis looks at accounts of women who, like Gilroy's conception of the "black Atlantic," have crossed the Atlantic Ocean or Caribbean Sea to live or work in other countries. Many of the writers have parents who were themselves exiles of Haiti and had children abroad. Many of the writers are United States-born Haitians and others were born in Haiti but grew up in the United States. All are members of the Haitian diaspora and thus part of Gilroy's construction of the "black Atlantic."

The diaspora of African descendants of slaves spreads across continents and nations. For the black diaspora, the question of identity lingers as these people move and acclimate to the nations in which they find places to call home. While diaspora implies the nostalgia for a home to which one can never return, Stuart Hall creates a new definition of diaspora that instead sees cultural identity as a "positioning." In this way, culture not only involves a remembrance of culture but also an active shifting of culture to one's current, personal context. In the example of accounts by Haitian diaspora in Edwidge Danticat's *The Butterfly's Way*, writers, artists, students, and others describe their experience as citizens of multiple countries. In the experiences of these Haitian-Americans, I see people navigating their cultural identity as Haitian, their racial identity as black, and their national identity as citizens of other countries. For many of these writers, culture becomes "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'" (Hall 225). Like Hall, these writers see themselves as positioned within their specific cultural and historical context.

For many of the writers in Danticat's text, their understanding of themselves as Haitian came to mean different things to them as they grew up, moved between Haiti and countries such as the United States, and experienced different types of discrimination or stereotyping when traveling abroad. For one, her culture became akin to her suitcase, a container filled with memories of Haitian culture but also a place to accrue outside experiences as she lived and worked in other countries (Heurtelou 89). Some left Haiti at a young age and hold onto childhood memories of their birthplace. Each uses her experiences as a transnational to discuss the multiplicity of identity. In the following analysis, I categorize each case study based on the ways in which they define their own identities. I begin with one woman's conception of her nationalisms, followed by two women's metaphors of identity as suitcases or cultural collages. Next, I focus on what I describe as multiple-consciousness through one woman's discussion of W. E. B. Du Bois. I follow this discussion with how one woman witnesses hybridity within herself and fellow members of the "black Atlantic," and lastly, I describe the story of one woman who describes her experience as a Haitian transnational as one of constant struggle. I focus on these six women's experiences as Haitian diaspora in order to see how they conceptualize their diaspora status and how their experience likens to that of transnationalism.

2.1. Nationalisms

Nationalism as a sign of identity has emerged late in history according to Benedict Anderson who marks the advent of print capitalism as solidifying the concept of nationhood. He describes this community as imagined, or an actively created group much like Laclau's notion of the group unified by an "empty signifier." In this way, the "black Atlantic" functions as one such community. Anderson explains: "It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the

minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 6). Both Laclau and Gilroy use the imagined community to amass groups into active community, but in the following case, this community becomes both broad and individually personalized. The idea of nationhood as imagined arises in one story by Miriam Neptune, a graduate student, who describes her experiences with her estranged father and loving mother. She concludes her story on the idea family and lineage by asserting:

“The only lineage I embrace is the one that raised me: my mother, her mother, and the mothers who created her. What is nation? What is my nation? Nation is in part, the imagination. Nation exists only where we create boundaries. My nation lives in the waters between spiritual and physical homes” (Neptune 151).

What is interesting is not only her emphasis on motherhood but also her conceptualization of nationhood. Like Anderson, Neptune emphasizes that nationhood involves its active creation. Thus, for Neptune, the boundaries of nationhood can stretch as far or shrink as close as she desires. However, unlike Anderson, she also individualizes nationhood, describing it as her own by saying “my nation” (Neptune 151). Her words parallel those of Derek Walcott, a Saint Lucian poet. In his piece *The Schooner’s Flight* the speaker describes the many nationalities he embodies and concludes that “either I’m nobody, or I’m a nation” (Walcott 4). The speaker individualizes nationhood as an inward plurality and perhaps Neptune does here as well. The term transnationalism fits well into this conception as it reemphasizes and allows room for the expression of multiple nationalities that exist, in particular, within the Haitian diaspora.

Rather than holding to one nationality or renouncing nationality altogether, Neptune both individualizes and broadens nationalism. It is both her personal nation and the larger nation of diaspora that becomes the in between of her homes. Many writers in Danticat’s anthology emphasize how they claim their Haitian nationality but understand that their nationalisms have accumulated as they have traveled or understood more sources of identity within themselves.

The terms Neptune uses to describe nationality also recalls Gilroy since she places the nation within “the waters” between her homes (Neptune 151). Gilroy also emphasizes this aquatic notion by describing the diasporic community as tied to the Atlantic Ocean. For Gilroy, the Atlantic however only means a connection to the slave trade and the ship routes it created. For Neptune, the water perhaps means something more amorphous and thus becomes more akin to hybridity. Like Hall, Neptune also hints at identity as something more open and less static. As mentioned earlier, Hall describes cultural identity as “the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture” (Hall 226). Neptune parallels this notion in her conception of nationality as something more fluid and that spans both her geographical and metaphysical homes. By both broadening her nation as imagined and individualizing her nationality as one that is genealogical, Neptune how transnationalism and hybridity work to describe the diasporic identity.

2.2 Suitcases and Cultural Collages

The transnational identity implies maintaining multiple national or cultural identities. For Maude Hertelou and Marie Nadine Pierre, two writers in Danticat’s text, the image of the traveling suitcase or collage becomes a way for understanding the cultural multiplicity of the Haitian diaspora. Maude Heurtelou, a native Haitian living in the United States and co-founder of a publishing company in Florida, tells of her experiences of travel as a Haitian diaspora living in three different countries. She describes her Haitian an identity as tied to a suitcase she carried that was full of nostalgic items. However, she broadens this physical suitcase to a metaphor of her cultural heritage. She says: “What I didn’t know then is that my suitcases were not only physical but also cultural. These suitcases, both cultural and physical, have been essential to my survival as an immigrant in three different countries” (Heurtelou 89). By likening her heritage to

a suitcase, Heurtelou emphasizes how her culture stays with her, and how she maintains her own history while moving across national borders. Furthermore, Heurtelou continues by describing what her interactions in other cultures have done for her cultural suitcase as well. At the end of her account, she gives a poignant conclusion about her movements across nations. She says:

“What my own cultural isolation as an immigrant in these places has taught me is that I am part of a living culture that in no way stops being a part of me, even when I am not completely immersed in it. With everything I do and say, I am perpetuating that culture, enriching it, modifying it when necessary, but contributing to its regeneration. My suitcases, both physical and cultural, have always, and will always, make me proud of my culture. They are perhaps a microcosm of what I am missing living abroad, but will never completely lose” (Heurtelou 93).

In this way, Heurtelou emphasizes that her Haitian culture remains but that it also goes through constant transformation as she obtains different cultural experiences.

Heurtelou likens her conception of culture to that of Stuart Hall who, as mentioned before, describes culture as “a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of ‘being’”. It belongs to the future as much as to the past. It is not something that already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture.... like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation” (Hall 225). Her suitcases become not only a preserver and a reminder of her culture but also becoming living experiences that emphasize the transformations in her life without complete erasure of her past history. Suitcases carry and collect items. In one sense, culture can be seen as a collection of experiences not just at home but also abroad.

Marie Nadine Pierre, a Nyabinghi Razette or female Rastafarian, describes herself as a collection or, in her words, a “collage” (Pierre 173). Rastafarians are a religious group of the African diaspora who reveres Haile Selassie I, former ruler of Ethiopia. Of her identity she says:

“My identity as a transnational Nyabinghi Razette, Haitian, working-class, dark-skinned black woman, doctoral candidate, mother, and wife is best captured by the creative and artistic framework of the collage that joins me not only to the

immediate Haitian *dyaspora* in the United States, but to the larger African community all over the world” (Pierre 173).

In this final statement where she asserts her identity as a collage, Pierre brings up many relevant terms for Gilroy’s “black Atlantic.” She identifies with the black diaspora when she connects herself to the globally dispersed African people. She also calls herself “dyaspora,” particularly Haitian diaspora, which connects herself to her homeland of Haiti. She distinguishes herself by gender when she notes her role as mother and wife. Rather than simply calling herself black, she refers to herself as “dark-skinned.” By distinguishing her socioeconomic class and shade of blackness, she politicizes her assertion of identity by hinting at both Marxist and race theory.

It is interesting that Pierre refers to herself as a collage but does not simply refer to her nationhood. Here we find so many different social identifiers at work within the person that cultural identity no longer becomes singular. Instead, transnationalism becomes a way to describe the cultural groups to which a person belongs. For Pierre, her nations include Haiti and the African diaspora as well as her many identifiers of wife, mother, race, and socioeconomic status. Not only does Pierre recognize her many social identifiers but she asserts a more transnational identity to describe her place in the black diaspora, or, for Gilroy, the “black Atlantic.”

2.3 Multiple-consciousness

Pierre’s multiplicity recalls Du Bois’ work on “double-consciousness” since Du Bois describes this double-ness one feels as both black and American. Toni Morrison nuances this description, since, for her, as mentioned earlier, American means white. In this sense, race, while an important signifier, is not the only signifier that defines these Haitian writers or those of the “black Atlantic.” Rather, race becomes one of many signifiers of identity for a person. According to both Du Bois and Morrison, race and nation are both intertwined and mutually exclusive.

Black Americans will always be Americans defined by race whereas the term “American,” according to Morrison, already has a racial connotation. For the racially black person who is a transnational, “double consciousness” becomes broadened as more signifiers of identity emerge as important group identifiers. To be simply one “empty signifier” of identity, whether that identity be one of race or nation, is limited since it ignores the multiplicity of identities that then find contextual importance and personal signification for each individual. Here, Pierre feels aware of a multiple-consciousness as she identifies with numerous types of identity. The notion of multiple-consciousness surfaces in many of the accounts I explore of people who are of Haitian descent but have traveled and lived in other countries.

The term “double-consciousness” in Du Bois’ original form actually emerges in the account of Sandy Alexandre who describes her experience as a Haitian-American child traveling to Haiti to live with her extended family for two weeks. Her trip is a punishment for what her mother perceives as her disrespectful American behavior, and, as a result, Alexandre travels to Haiti to gain a more Haitian upbringing. In describing her interactions with her mother in the United States, Alexandre appropriates Du Bois’ term to say: “With each child that a Haitian mother has to raise in America, she has to deal with the *triple*-consciousness of its Haitian, American, and Black identities” (Alexandre 184). Her description of identity, like Du Bois’ is multi-layered. Not only does Alexandre describe her national identity as both Haitian and American but also her racial identity as black. It seems that being Haitian and black are two separate identities. Much like Du Bois, who observes the split in his black and American identity, Alexandre does the same and includes her Haitian identity to emphasize her multiple-consciousness.

This multiple consciousness seems to mean that nationhood and race become separate but equally important identities to transnational persons. While all writers cited in this paper describe their travels across borders, they still emphasize their Haitian culture as well as their black cultures. Nationhood, I assert, remains important to diaspora. For Heurtelou, this nationhood becomes a suitcase of protection as she travels across borders and gains new experiences. It is not that she only fills her suitcase with Haitian culture and lets it become a microcosm of her identity. She also insists that her identity is in constant transformation as she crosses borders and overlaps cultures and nations. Alexandre continues this theme when she says “When you come to know and embrace yourself—whether you have two, three, or four identities to reconcile—you understand that you have everything to gain from those experiences that challenge your justifications for being who you say and think you are” (Alexandre 184). She emphasizes these experiences as both a constant transformation and as something beneficial. Her words evoke Hall once again who sees diaspora as a hybrid multiplicity and constant change, or in his words, a “positioning.” In this way, cultural heritage is no longer a static clinging to the past but a set of experiences that cultivates multiple selves. Hybridity works then to describe this navigation of multiple identities or even multiple-consciousness for the transnational diaspora of the “black Atlantic.”

2.4 Hybridity within the “black Atlantic”

Alexandre, in describing her sense of triple-consciousness, brings up race as a separate identifier. In her personal story, Annie Grégoire describes her own racial experience as a darker skinned Haitian-American. She describes her childhood as one in which she endured teasing for her black skin from people who would also be termed black. She reflects on this part of her life and says: “Although I learned to tolerate the taunting, I was somewhat confused about how dark

a person needed to be in order to be called ‘Blackie’ since many of the individuals who belittled me were just a shade or two lighter” (Grégoire 157). Grégoire describes a similar experience during a study abroad term in France where she learned the differences amongst blacks of different nationalities. She describes a conflict she witnessed between West Indians and West Africans in which the notion of African heritage fueled the debate. She describes the conflict as follows: “While a number of Africans believed that Francophone West Indians tended to promote their European or Indian ancestry while denying their African roots, some West Indians, particularly Guadeloupians and Martinicans, felt that the African presence in France was a reminder of past slavery and present colonization” (Grégoire 159).

It is sad to see members of the African diaspora in conflict, but this incident also tells how very strongly the presence of colonization remains. From Grégoire’s observations in France, the question of cultural identity after the mass dispersal of Africans in the Atlantic slave trade remains. For the Black Atlantic community in France, divisions based on cultural identity straddles both the question of how to negotiate the past but how to create identity in the present. Both the Africans and West Indians witness the results of slavery and colonization in each other. For the Africans, the West Indian hybridity of European and black influences functions as a denial of their African roots. For West Indians, specifically Guadeloupians and Martinicans, the physical presence of Africans living in France becomes a sort of transnational hybridity that, for Guadeloupians and Martinicans, recalls that shared colonial past of slavery. In this sense, the question of hybrid identity even creates tensions within groups of people in the black Atlantic and not just individuals. The question of identity and slave history once again emerges in this debate Grégoire witnesses.

Grégoire, in her experience in France, brings up the issue of history and nationalism when she describes an incident where she taunted for her black skin. She says: “Strangers often called out ‘*Africaine!*’ when I walked by. To retaliate, I proudly let them know of my Haitian heritage, reminding them of the Caribbean colony France had lost through a slave revolt” (Grégoire 159-160). Grégoire emphasizes her blackness as a sign of honor in a former colonizer’s land, but she also highlights her own country’s particular history within that black community of great persons. In this way, she emphasizes that multiple-consciousness in that she shows her pride in her blackness but also particularizes it to highlight the great historic liberation by the Haitian people. In this way, she aligns herself with the African diasporic community as well as her own particular triumph as a descendant of Haitian freedom fighters. This transnational move both highlights Haitian national strength and reinforces the strength of black people, turning what was a negative generalization through the shout of *Africaine* into a badge of pride.

2.5 Transnationalism

Further emphasizing this notion of nationalism, and in particular, transnationalism, is the story of Francie Latour, a journalist who shares her story of reporting in Haiti. When she lands in Haiti, she describes her transnationalism as uncomfortable. She says that “like many children of immigrants born and raised in the United States, I have skated precariously along the hyphen of my Haitian-American identity” (Latour 125). In emphasizing the hyphen within her Haitian identity, Latour shows that for her, to balance both identities remains a struggle. She continues this theme when she says: “As the airplane touched down on Haiti’s cracked soil, the hyphen that held me together started to feel more like the fulcrum of a seesaw whose plank was about to tip on end or the other” (Latour 126). What becomes interesting is how, for Latour, when she enters

her homeland as a transnational Haitian, her hybridity seems to arise and persistently make its presence known. For the transnational Latour, nationhood starts to become an inward battle in a second home she revisits.

Latour describes her feelings of alienation not only because of her physical experience visiting Haiti but also because of how she describes herself. She explains that Haitians born or living abroad have specific names given by local Haitians. She says:

“‘You were made outside.’ This is the way many Haitians speak of those of us who were born or grew up in the United States. It is as much a badge of pride as it is a sting of resentment. The ones made outside have proven how well Haitians can flourish in the land of opportunity. But, in all our successes, we have also abandoned them” (Latour 131).

Latour describes her identity in such a way as to hint at a hybrid nationalism or transnationalism.

Latour shows that Haitians not born in Haiti remain Haitian; they are simply birthed in a different physical place.

However, Latour also sees this personalization as Haitian coupled with the emphasis on distance as a branding of both pride and shame. Her ability to remain a Haitian outside of Haiti is laudable, but to her it also means that she is not fully committed to Haiti in a geographical sense. This sense of physical distance seems to mean much to Latour, and the hyphen that doubles her identity also distances her from one of those identities. Latour’s hybridity becomes for her a sense of guilt, and she describes her distance from Haiti as a cultural loss. She says “For Haitians who have struggled through the poverty and terror of daily life, there is no room for hyphens in a person’s identity. Because I have not suffered with them, I can never be of them” (Latour 131). For Latour cultural experience becomes the key to identity. Latour appears to regret her transnationalism because it comes at a loss to one of her identities.

For Latour, hybridity as a transnational citizen of Haiti and the United States means she must balance both nationalities rather than dedicate time to simply one nation. This balance or hyphen around which she “skated precariously” becomes something very present and real to Latour, and she continues to struggle with it (Latour 125). Latour emphasizes the point that her own experience as a transnational truly means an active creating and negotiating between cultures. To be a part of two or more cultures, transnationalism requires an active engagement with the hybrid self.

3. Conclusions

Through these case studies, transnationalism for the black diaspora involves an active negotiating of multiple selves that are not limited to nationality. Rather, some authors wrote about what can be called a multiple-consciousness rather than simply Du Bois’ notion of “double consciousness.” For some, the balance of these multiple identities produces guilt as one cannot dedicate one’s cultural experience to simply one nation. For others, this multiplicity becomes a source of celebration and pride as experiences come to shape who one is and become an accumulation of experiences that only further develop one’s identity. Rather than simply holding onto one identity, each identity that transnationals of the black diaspora holds remains important. These identities mirror Hall’s conception of the hybrid personae and become a way of navigating and constructing the self across national borders and the history of the black diaspora.

Gilroy creates the collective group of the “black Atlantic,” and this collective identity allows for a powerful group unity. By building upon black political movements before him, Gilroy desires to form the diverse people of African descent and black slavery culture into a powerful movement of people secure and empowered under a common identity of the “black Atlantic.” One could assert that Gilroy parallels Laclau’s notion of the “empty signifier” and

puts it into practice. For Gilroy, the hollowed out signifier that unites all black people is the representation of the slave ship and the Atlantic Ocean, which allows it to connect to all experiences of oppression as well as slavery.

For Laclau, political action can be achieved in part by group unity. He describes the motivation for unity as the solidifying of a common demand. For Gilroy, this demand becomes the collective unity for identity as the “black Atlantic.” However, through the example of the Haitian diaspora, the possibility of differential demands of identities arises. With the example of journalist Francie Latour’s story, her struggle with identity became a conflict of interests as she felt that her physical distance from Haiti as a transnational meant a betrayal of her Haitian identity. She describes the hyphen holding her two identities together as a seesaw that tipped from one side to the other. Latour’s example shows that identity does not remain static. Latour and the Haitian “black Atlantic” express a more hybrid nature rather than a static, homogenous assertion of identity.

Gilroy brings up hybridity as a factor in the “black Atlantic” when he addresses a conflict from history that addresses the issue of differential identity. In creating a cultural lineage of the “black Atlantic,” Gilroy focuses much on the commonalities found in music and literature to trace the lineage of a distinct “black Atlantic” culture. One example that Gilroy cites involves the disagreement between musicians Wynton Marsalis and Miles Davis who argued over the notion of maintaining a black identity in jazz music. For Marsalis, jazz became a medium that would continue and retain black culture through the creation of an authentic black sound. According to Gilroy, Davis rather “insisted upon prioritising the restless creative energies that could keep the corrosive processes of reification and commodification at bay” (97). In this sense, Davis could be said as not wanting to be limited to the cultural framework that Marsalis defined as “black

culture.” Gilroy responds to this conflict by stating: “My point here is that the unashamedly hybrid character of these black Atlantic cultures continually confounds any simplistic (essentialist or anti-essentialist) understanding of the relationship between racial identity and racial non-identity, between folk cultural authenticity and pop cultural betrayal” (Gilroy 99). I found a similar disagreement in the text through Annie Grégoire’s story of West Indians and Africans in France. Once again, the issue of identity arises as each group disagrees over authenticity and resisting the historic traces of colonialism either through assimilating French culture or physically living in France.

Both of these issues attest to the problem of generalizing the black identity into a simple argument of blackness and authenticity. Blackness can be interpreted into a multitude of identities for people of the “black Atlantic.” Blackness includes multiple nationalities, cultures, experiences, socioeconomic classes, degrees of racial identity, amongst many other identities. These serve to foster uniqueness within the “black Atlantic,” and also attest to the many effects of colonization as the mass dispersal of African slaves in the Atlantic slave trade meant that blacks would find themselves in different nations and histories as time progressed. This variegated history does not become a lament for a faraway past. Rather it becomes a celebration of how far blacks of the “black Atlantic” have come to both influence and be influenced by the many nations, histories, and lands that they have traversed over the centuries. To silence these new histories is to ignore the hybridity within the “black Atlantic.” To introduce these multifaceted histories as a transnational identity is one of several ways to characterize the “black Atlantic.” As has been seen, many Haitian transnationals have used their experiences to shape their own futures and observe how placement and cultural context emphasize Hall’s description of culture as a positioning. The “black Atlantic” both unifies and generalizes. Instead, the “black

Atlantic” should celebrate its diversity of people and embrace every aspect of its past, present, and future.

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